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OF SURREALISM & MARXISM

LEXICON, NONPOLITICS MARXISM, SURREALISM

1924-1929: Breton's First and Second Manifesto of Surrealism

In the preface to the 1924 First Manifesto of Surrealism, André Breton describes the quintessential character of everyday life in modernity as approximating an absolute sense of alienation, from both the individual relative to themselves and their world. For Breton, Europe after the First World War, and particularly its effects upon the revolutionary tradition of France, made only a single promise: that this modern condition of everyday life, their worlds, and the opportunities those conditions and worlds afforded for the exercise of a revolutionary imagination, which goes as far back as the French Revolution, appeared to increasingly dissuade individuals of any hope for social transformation. As Simon Baker notes in his

What is undeniable, however, is that the work started in 1789 was unfinished in 1924 when la Révolution surréaliste 'exploded' onto the scene. The surrealists might dream of a new declaration of the rights of man but the 'Camelots du Roi' (the hardcore monarchist wing of the Action Française), could muster a sizable force in the streets of the capital. Marx's 'tradition of the dead generations' fermented by a radicalised education system, and inflicted with a 'sacred' union of church and state, sanction the mass slaughter of a generation of young Frenchmen in the trenches...²

Against this backdrop it is no surprise that there is little in the world that appears worthy of investing with the power and hopes that come with this long tradition, and even longer anticipation, of revolution. As Breton writes:

Such is the belief in life, in the most precarious aspects of life, by which is meant real life, that in the end belief is lost. Man, that inveterate dreamer, more and more discontented day by day with his fate, orbits with difficulty around the objects he has been led to make use of, those which indifference has handed him, or his own efforts, almost always his efforts, since he has consented to labour, at least he has not been averse to chancing his luck (what he calls his luck!). A vast modesty is now his lot...³

Breton goes on to develop what we might call a 'theory of the imagination', or at the very least develop an understanding of the importance of imagination and its role in social life in the face of modernity as alienated, subjected to practical necessities, and

promising, in the end, that the only thing we can believe in is that our beliefs increasingly find themselves without grounds or reasons upon which to stand. Thus, in this First Manifesto it is clear what surrealism came to loathe: the domestication of our powers of imagination by virtue of their application being solely bound to the realm of labour and necessity. And this situation was loathsome due to Breton's belief in our presently alienated cognitive powers of imagination holding important and unrealized truths regarding the self, the other, the world, and most importantly regarding the necessary means to realize otherwise neglected aspects of human subjectivity. In a world that only deepens in its alienation from itself, says Breton, imagination appears as a site for the possibility of disalienation and of the creative/artistic activity of individuals freed from necessity and wage-labour.

Even in the realm of cultural production, Breton finds the faculty of imagination to be put to use in the most banal and insulting ways: "It feeds on newspaper articles, and holds back science and art, while applying itself to flattering the lowest taste of its readers; clarity bordering on stupidity, the life lived by dogs."⁴ Not so much a plea for hardening the divide between high and low art (and, after all, surrealism was to become an attempt at creating aesthetic and cultural practices which exist beyond this divide itself ⁵), and more of a rejection of this 'life lived by dogs,' Breton recognized the hegemony held over individuals by a kind of realism/positivism, which he traces back to Aquinas and Anatole France: "The realistic position...inspired by positivism, from Thomas Aquinas to Anatole France, appears to me to be totally hostile to all intellectual and moral progress."⁶ With the predominance of this 'culture of a positivism of the everyday,' not only has the quality of cultural products diminished before the surrealist's eyes. Additionally, for Breton, all of those practices that have come to be normalized, which are mediated by social institutions, need to be identified and treated as something that must be expelled from social life: "Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the spirit everything that might rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, fancy, forbidding any kind of research into the truth which does not conform to accepted practice."⁷

It is important to note that with the First Manifesto, Breton was primarily concerned with the issues surrounding surrealist art works; so much so that he in fact claims to have dedicated the studies appended to the Manifesto entirely to poetic surrealism.⁸ With the 1930 publication of the Second Manifesto of Surrealism, however, Breton's view of surrealism sharpens in tone and proposes a decidedly political framework through which we are to understand surrealist interventions in both art and social life (these revisions are due, in part, to the significant fall out between members of Breton's group who he deemed as members of the surrealist movement and those who, during the writing of the second manifesto, were deemed as traitors or apologists for the social order surrealism sought to attack). While in the First Manifesto surrealism mainly aimed to recuperate the loss and/or alienation of the imagination within individual and social life, the Second Manifesto takes as its target social totality in toto. That is, in its second manifestation, surrealism transformed into an all-out attack against the current state of things. And it is precisely this version of surrealism that takes as its target and enemy social totality as such that lead to one of the most memorable declarations regarding surrealism's commitment to the principles of total revolt, non-compromise with the current state of society, and the affirmation that all one can reasonably expect from the world is violence and violence in return:

Surrealism was not afraid to make for itself a tenet of total revolt, complete insubordination, of sabotage according to rule, and...it still expects nothing save from violence. The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.⁹

A few comments are merited by a remark as bold as this. First, it should be said, that the above passage could be taken as a metaphor or as an allegory, since one of the primary tools used by surrealists to bypass the prevailing clichés and base attitudes they attributed to the world around them was the practice of automatic writing, a kind of writing that is supposed to aid surrealist compositions by helping you "forget about your genius, your talents, and those of others." It is a practice that begins with an individual telling themselves that "literature is one of the saddest roads leading to everything. Write swiftly with no preconceived subject, swiftly enough that you cannot retain it, and are not tempted to re-read."¹⁰ The works produced by this method were to allow for the expression of all that is irrational, a-logical, and all that remained alienated and repressed by modernity's domestication of the imagination. And in a sense, we are right to see Breton's call for the random firing of a gun into a crowd as a vulgar provocation, but ultimately as a re-purposing of the original example of automatic writing from the First Manifesto. And yet...

By contrast, one would also be right to take Breton's prescription literally. To do so, however, requires paying due attention to the sentence immediately after the one that characterizes the simplest of surrealist acts, since it is there that he qualifies who the crowd is in the first place. For Breton, the crowd are those who have, not even once, 'dreamed of putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization.' To have never had this dream of revolution, then, is symptomatic of the fact that one belongs to the class in society that benefits from this debasement and cretinization of everyday life. Thus, those who have never had this dream are the ones who find themselves confronted by the surrealist's gun, with their 'belly at barrel level'. Thus, one can take Breton's call to arms literally insofar as one acknowledges the fact that this call to arms is qualified by a class analysis and the kind of socio-economic hierarchies that define the present state of affairs. While surrealism may have begun as a diagnosis of the severity of alienation within social life, whose solution was the liberation of our powers of imagination, surrealism was to ultimately become an aspiration for collective emancipation by means of insubordination, sabotage, and a total revolt against

capitalist social relations.

The Politics of Surrealism: Breton to Césaire

Setting aside Breton's two manifestoes and its assertion of total revolt in order to liberate our individual and collective faculty of imagination, it is still possible to approach the relationship between surrealism and politics productively via their political writings, which openly support

the anti-imperial struggle in Vietnam and the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria, for example.¹¹ Alternatively, one could begin with a consideration of some key surrealist art works. For example, Yves Tanguy's 'Surrealist Map of the World' from 1929 presents a global map that omits all of Europe (except Paris) and the whole of the United States, that is, a map that excludes a majority of those nation-states whose progress has been predicated in colonial violence and imperial rule. By exploring surrealism's relationship to politics, and specifically its commitment to an anti-colonial politics could help us understand how surrealism sought to combine critique, humor, and subversion in the production of aesthetic objects.¹²

But an altogether different approach one can be one similar to that of Michael Löwy's *Morning Star*, wherein Löwy emphasizes the utopian themes that bring together the traditions of surrealism and Marxism (as well as situationism and anarchism). With respect to surrealism, Löwy's analysis begins from a position that views surrealism as a movement that preceded the collective development of aesthetic and cultural modes of thought and practice as the means for contributing to the notion of communism as that real movement which abolishes capital and itself in the process. For Löwy, then, the surrealist's Marxism qualifies their politics as a 'Gothic' or 'Romantic' version of Marxism. As he writes,

Perhaps one might call it a "Gothic Marxism," that is, a historical materialism sensitive to the marvelous, to the dark moment of revolt, to the illumination which pierces, like lightening, the sky of revolutionary action. In any case, this Marxism...draws upon the subterranean current running through the twentieth century, beneath the immense blockades constructed by orthodoxy: Romantic Marxism. By this I mean a kind of thought which is fascinated by certain cultural forms of the precapitalist past and which reject the cold, abstract rationality of modern industrial civilization...All Romantic Marxists struggle against the capitalist disenchantment of the world...but in André Breton and the Surrealists the Romantic/revolutionary urge to reenchant [sic] the world through imagination finds its most striking expression.¹³

This 'romantic' or 'gothic' qualifier places surrealism's political commitments alongside those of other Marxists who are skeptical of a program based on a notion of one revolutionary party organized and unified on the basis of class identity/interests. For Breton and his circle, class struggle as both an objective feature of capitalist society and a subjective feature of revolutionary politics had largely been eroded from the everyday lives of modern Europeans. That is, for the surrealists at least, it became necessary to acknowledge and admit the insufficiency of the categories of class struggle and class based identities in the project of organizing revolutionary politics. Whether one is confronted by a situation of the mass impoverishment of society's powers of political imagination or a situation where the reality of social life is defined and structured in terms of the antagonism between colonizer and the colonized, surrealism's 'Gothic/Romantic' elements are grounded upon a belief in the need for supplementing traditional notions of class-identity and class struggle with cultural, aesthetic, and artistic objects and practices. Following Löwy's characterization, then, we encounter an image of surrealism as a political and cultural movement that finds it necessary to construct any future class antagonism through political, cultural, social, and symbolic means. And this was due to the surrealist's historical situation as one where the simple positing of class struggle waned, not in terms of its capacity for organizing the working class, but insofar as this orthodox rallying cry required supplementation from previously ignored, non-economic factors. Despite the merits of Löwy's historical analysis, however, his own narrative of surrealism's relation to revolutionary politics remains silent regarding the contributions made by non-European figures that were influenced by, and improved upon, the project of surrealism as a whole. Despite Löwy's silence about what we might call surrealism's 'colonial question', it is notable that Aimé Césaire doesn't appear in his reconstruction of surrealism's 'Gothic Marxism'; an absence that is even more surprising given the fact that Löwy's category of 'Gothic' is supposed to suggest some necessary and historical relationship between pre-modern European society and its subsequent modernization with industrial capital. So despite the fact that a study of the relation between surrealism and revolutionary politics can be taken up in a variety of ways, it is in light of the absence of individuals such as Césaire from the historical narrative of surrealism provided by Löwy that we will begin our inquiry into what we can call surrealism's 'colonial question'.

Black-Object/White-Subject: Breton's Exoticism and the concept of Negritude

Regarding Césaire, two things merit our attention. First, Césaire's theoretical and political development owes much to his encounter with surrealism and the inspiration found therein – the idea that the imagination cannot be beholden to the requirements and obligations of necessity, practical activity, what Marx would call 'the working day,' or the idea that the imagination must be liberated from the colonization of both one's social and psychic reality. More importantly, however, Césaire's work remains irreducible to the view that would understand his accomplishments as offering nothing new in terms of theoretical

or practical insight due to the fact that these were simply a correct, or corrected, application of everything that can be found in Breton's writings. It is against this view that we aim to demonstrate the following thesis: whereas Breton only provided us with a vague and hypothetical description of revolutionary subjectivity as defined by the simple act of randomly firing into a crowd, it is the likes of Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, and Léopold Sédar Senghor who were capable of articulating a concept of a revolutionary agent who would be adequate to the task of abolishing the present state of affairs.

Reflecting on his relationship to surrealism in the 1967 interview with René Depestres at the Cultural Congress of Havana, Césaire makes the following remark:

A.C.: Surrealism interested me to the extent that it was a liberating factor.

R.D.: So you were very sensitive to the concept of liberation that surrealism contained. Surrealism called forth deep and unconscious forces.

A.C.: Exactly. And my thinking followed these lines: Well then, if I apply the surrealist approach to my particular situation, I can summon up these unconscious forces. This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: it's true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black.

R.D.: In other words, it was a process of disalienation.

A.C.: Yes, a process of disalienation; that's how I interpreted surrealism.¹⁴

From this exchange we see how Césaire came to appreciate something specific to surrealism as a whole: namely, the aspiration of finally doing away with the modern condition of social/individual alienation that is produced by socio-economic inequalities. In the face of France's ongoing colonial violence, Césaire found in surrealism the desire and search for a new kind of subjectivity, a desire and search that ultimately confirmed his own ideas regarding what must be done in the face of colonial violence. However, and more important for our purposes, it is precisely in this moment when Césaire turned to surrealism as a resource for abolishing the colonial situation where we begin to see the break between Breton's and Césaire's surrealist infused politics.

While Césaire worked with and drew from the surrealist tradition, his use of surrealism brought all the tools of the movement into explicit contact with the question of colonialism and colonized subjectivity. Despite what some might say regarding Breton's early manifestoes expressing solidarity with colonized peoples, Césaire's thematization of the relationship between Africa and Europe as similar to the relationship between those aspects of unconscious life consciousness seeks to repress, provides one with the historical conditions on which a theory of revolutionary subjectivity adequate to the communist project is simultaneously a theory of subjectivity that seeks to address the way in which colonialism and its effects remain inextricably linked to capital's self-valorization and self-reproduction.

In other words, it was by combining the psychoanalytic model of psychic repression with a historical material understanding of capitalist development that Césaire was able to show how European colonization is tantamount to the foundational and unconscious trauma that structures psychosocial life, a trauma which acts as the motor of the civil society's attempts at repressing or containing anti-colonial rebellion. Colonization and primitive accumulation, in other words, are the historico-transcendental conditions that gives rise to the alienation experienced, identified, and criticized by Breton relative to white European subjectivity. And as if in anticipation of this debate regarding Césaire's synthesis between the psychic and historical trauma of colonization, Kodwo Eshun perfectly captures the stakes of Césaire's work in his reflections on colonization as the foundational and historical trauma that inaugurates that period we innocently call 'modernity':

...African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect.¹⁵

At this point, however, it seems crucial to ask whether these insights of Césaire were truly absent from, or foreclosed by, the likes of Breton and his circle. In light of this concern, an understanding of how non-Western art objects were privately collected, or accumulated, and then used as inspiration in both Césaire's and Breton's reflections on surrealism will be instructive. Unlike Césaire, Breton's relationship to non-Western art whether in terms of his private collection or in terms of it serving as source material and inspiration for his understanding of surrealism, failed to rid itself of fetishizing or exoticizing discourses regarding colonized peoples. As Martine Antle and Katharine Conley demonstrated in their essay 'Dada, Surrealism, and Colonialism', the main European figures within the surrealist movement (despite their best intentions) engaged in the fetishization of non-Western objects and icons:

...in 1960, Breton, Leiris, and other surrealists signed the "Manifesto of the 121" in support of the people of Algeria who had taken up arms against the French government...While these political positions were undoubtedly sincere and even inspiring...in many ways they were contradicted by the surrealists' enthusiasm for ceremonial objects that French colonialism and a new market for non-Western objects in the Americas made available to them, which they collected and admired as art from a perspective that could be understood today as intellectually colonizing.¹⁶

In light of the conflict between the surrealists avowed anti-colonial politics and their fetishism of non-Western art, Antle and Conley suggest that the surrealists “were more concerned with the exploration of exoticism than in actual research on the specificity of various colonial contexts.”¹⁷ Katharine Conley further develops this tension by foregrounding the contradiction between Breton's overt anti-colonial writings and beliefs with the fact that Breton himself amassed a collection of non-Western art from those places dominated by colonial and/or imperial rule. For Conley, the mounting evidence, which complicates our image of Breton, forces us to wonder how one of the founders of the surrealist movement was able to justify his anti-colonial politics given his participation in the market of non-Western art objects, a market whose existence is predicated on the continuation of colonial violence?

Turning to Césaire, and in light of Antle's and Conley's work put in the service of complicating our understanding of European surrealism's relationship to non-Western cultures, it is clear that the relation Césaire established between non-Western aesthetic practices and anti-colonial struggle is one which plumbs the depths of colonial history in order to construct that sought after subject of ‘total revolt’ and without recourse to Breton's dogmatic affirmation of the mystical and/or spiritual promise of non-Western art practices.

For Césaire, this meant developing a position that was fundamentally black and is properly viewed through the lens of what he, along with Léon-Gontran Damas and Léopold Sédar Senghor, termed Negritude. This concept of Negritude was intentionally constructed to be as broad and subject to various interpretations and applications since it was developed as a tool for accounting for a history as varied as the African Diaspora itself. As Jayne Cortez has noted, Negritude is a properly historical category since it aims to understand a history that:

...is large, broad, complicated, and crosses many cultures, many languages, many national borders, and a multitude of circumstances...Damas used to say: “Negritude has many fathers but only one mother.” His confidence, solidarity, Pan-Africanism meant Negritude. Negritude as a force that exists to help forge a new world. Negritude as a step used in literature to fight the slave master, to defend oneself against negative images, distorted information, cultural and spiritual imperialism...Negritude as black life, black thought, black attitude and multiculturalism. Negritude as a link between the past, present, and future.¹⁸

Negritude is a historical category of surrealism precisely because it is the concept that renders intelligible an alienation and dispossession whose history predates the individual, social, and economic alienation criticized by Breton: namely, the historical dispossession and alienation experienced by colonized peoples at the hands of Europe that is subsequently covered over by European modernity and civilization.

It is important to stress that what differentiates Césaire's ‘surrealism’ from that of Breton's goes beyond the first point that was to be demonstrated; namely, the practical differences in how and why each surrealist appreciated, or collected non-Western art objects. More importantly, and with respect to the second point regarding Breton's theoretical shortcomings, it is of significance that it would be Césaire and not Breton who would develop this concept of Negritude. Thus, to claim Césaire is irreducible to his influences from Breton and other white, European, surrealists is to say that what surrealism set out to do at its inception (liberate our collective imagination, emancipate humanity) could not simply be achieved by writing manifestoes of solidarity with colonized peoples around the world or even producing works of art that sought to subvert the dominant ways through which people understood themselves as belonging to an imagined community. Despite the virtues of these expressions of solidarity (the virtue of which is mainly Breton's clarity in how he regards capitalist alienation requiring colonial domination), the limits of this expression is to be found precisely in the inability to develop a positive notion of revolutionary agency on the basis of a historical and materialist analysis of European modernity.

Césaire, by contrast, constructs the positive concept of Negritude on the basis of a materialist critique of the colonial foundations of capitalist modernity; this concept is the foundation for articulating a notion of revolutionary agency that is adequate to the historical situation whereby capital guarantees its own self-reproduction/self-valorization by means of maintaining colonies along the European periphery. Thus, if surrealism was to live up to its socio-political aspirations there is reason to believe that it was Césaire, along with Damas, Senghor, and others who belong to African diasporic histories who brought surrealism closest to its goals.

Marx, Victor Brauner, and China Miéville: towards a Marxist-surrealism?

Surrealism, as I have discussed, has always maintained some relation to political action and social revolution, whether considered in Breton's more polarizing rhetoric of the Second Manifesto or in Césaire's use and innovation of surrealist methods with respect to the question of colonialism and colonized subjects. However, could we say that there is something ‘surrealist’ in quality about a thinker such as Marx who not only lived prior to the movement but who gave scant attention to questions surrounding art and art practices? The working hypothesis in this final section is the following: there are, in fact, surrealist elements in Marx's own thought and these elements are surrealist in a sense that Breton and others would easily recognize. In order to show this we can begin by comparing two well-known passages from Capital vol. 1:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the

analysis of the commodity.¹⁹

However, let us remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity.²⁰

What is immediately clear is the change in the meaning of the term 'commodity', and as it relates to individuals within society, from the first to the second of these passages from Capital. The important point to make here is that while commodities are our initial, immediate, and most common way of encountering and familiarizing ourselves with social life under capitalism, commodities themselves indicate a more primary process, or relation: the 'identical social substance' of labour. In other words, we find ourselves predisposed toward an experience of the world as populated mostly by commodities and things as opposed to people and meaningful social bonds (i.e., we are atomized, isolated, and alien to others and ourselves). However, there is one final and well-known passage from Marx that will allow us to establish a reasonable basis for our claim that surrealism, in its artistic and political adventures, maintained a relation to Marx in a fundamental way:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing, which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of the wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing on its own free will.²¹

In this passage where Marx describes a commodity as it 'transcends sensuousness' we encounter the undeniably surrealist moment where commodities appear to have more in common with surrealist paintings and images than with their concrete, material, constitution. This is not simply reducible, however, to the fact that Marx's description mimics the kinds of paintings and artworks surrealists would later come to depict. Rather, the surrealist tenor of Marx's thought pertains to how Marx conceives of the relationship between concrete commodity and its abstract social function. For Marx, to conceive of commodities according to a properly radical critique of political economy means understanding how what is given in immediate experience contains more reality than made available by experience as such. As Sami Khatib has noted in his reading of Benjamin's essay on surrealism in conjunction with Sohn-Rethel's concept of real-abstraction, surrealism is present in Marx's thought insofar as both surrealism and Marx himself were concerned with rendering explicit that which simply remained implicit in bourgeois economic analysis. As Khatib writes,

Things as commodities are not 'what they really-concretely are' – their social properties are not derived from their physical shape or practical use. Rather, they are 'what they really-abstractly are' – the material or symbolic screen of abstract social relations. In this way, the reality of commodities exceeds the binary of either concrete materiality or merely illusionary abstractions; in a quite non-metaphorical sense, capitalist reality is made of, saturated with sur-reality.²²

With respect to this surrealist element of Marx's own thought, two examples from surrealist art and literary theory are worth mentioning. First, a painting by Victor Brauner from 1939 entitled *Fascination* (as seen below). Depicted by Brauner is a table whose component parts include a wolf-like creature's upper torso, head, scrotum, and tail. Seated at the table is a ghostly apparition in female form but whose hair has been transformed into the long neck and head of a bird-like creature. The room is unremarkable relative to the figure at the table and the table itself, though one can see, through what could be a window on the wall the viewer is facing, a landscape that is equally banal yet suggestive of an indefinite horizon or expanse. Additionally of interest is the placement of the scrotum, which one might reasonably attribute to the wolf-table. However, the scrotum is in fact placed directly underneath the female apparition's seat as well as the table's tail; if only to emphasize the already opaque nature and androgynous quality of our social/individual unconscious desires.

While one might be tempted to interpret *Fascination* as a straightforward representation of polymorphous perversity and the Freudian approach which views female sexuality as being fundamentally constituted by penis-envy, there remains a more critical possibility when viewed in conjunction with Marx's analysis of commodities and the way in which, in the words of Khatib, commodities are 'what they really-abstractly are'. According to this view, what is on display in Brauner's painting is less of a utopic vision of what our liberated desires might look like and more of a diagnosis of the antagonism at work in an unconscious shaped by capitalist social relations. As Silvia Federici writes when reflecting on the relationship between the working week (labor-time) and the weekend (leisure-time):

Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process...This being the promise, what we actually get is far from our expectations [...] Little spontaneity is possible when the timing, conditions, and the amount of energy available for love, are out of our control. After a week of work our bodies and feelings are numb, and we cannot turn them on like machines. But what comes out when we "let go" is more often our repressed frustration and violence than our hidden self ready to be reborn in bed.²³

To make matters worse, says Federici, it isn't just the fatigue from the working day that spoils our sexual adventures. The 'main reason why we cannot enjoy the pleasure that sexuality may provide is that for women sex is work. Giving pleasure to man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman. Sexual freedom does not help. In the past, we were just expected to raise children. Now we are expected to have a waged job, still clean the house and have children and, at the end of a double workday, be ready to hop in bed and be sexually exciting. For women the right to have sex is the duty to have sex and to enjoy it.'²⁴ So contrary to the naïve belief that a certain freedom rests in our ability to 'let go' and indulge in the pleasures of sex, what we encounter in Brauner's painting when viewed in relation to both Marx and Federici is that the 'truth' of our desires is to be 'what they really-abstractly are': the social relations that are at work in a material (body) or symbolic (painting) screen.

The second way in which one can speak of a surrealist tenor of Marx's thinking can be seen in the work of China Miéville. In contrast to the position taken by someone like Lukács – who placed surrealism at the head of a long and reactionary aesthetic trend relative to an orthodox Marxist aspiration whose aim is arriving at an objective analysis of social totality²⁵ – Miéville argues for the merits of the imagination and fantastic mode of thought vis-à-vis the Marxist tradition. Similar to what we saw with Breton's suspicion that alienation has now taken root in the depths of individual's faculty/exercise of imagination, Miéville views the uses of an emancipated imagination for aesthetic and cultural production as a good, desirable, and therefore virtuous mode of thinking; a mode of thought, says Miéville, that has been indispensable for understanding the radical potential offered by the Marxist tradition in light of the present historical conjuncture.

The argument in favor of the surreal and fantastic uses of the imagination is best seen in his essay 'Marxism and Fantasy,' where Miéville exposes a moment of surrealism within Marx's own analysis of capitalist social relations. For Miéville, Marx's surrealism is not to be found at the level of interpretation, genealogy, etymological analysis, or even the historical mapping of his influences. On the contrary, Miéville locates Marx's surrealist moment by emphasizing the continuous mistranslation of Marx's chosen term, *ungeheure*, for describing how capitalist social relations are given to us in our sensuous and immediate apprehension of the world (this is a mistranslation that still persists in present English translations of the first volume of *Capital*). Reflecting on the term *ungeheure* in light of the commodity form and as it relates to fantastic modes of thought, Miéville writes the following:

In a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates the mental space redefining...the impossible. This is sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real. Bearing in mind Marx's point that the real and the not-real are constantly cross-referenced in the productive activity by which humans interact with the world, changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities. Let me emphatically stress that this is not to make the ridiculous suggestion that fantastic fiction gives a clear view of political possibilities or acts as a guide to political action. I am claiming that the fantastic, particularly because 'reality' is a grotesque 'fantastic form', is good to think with. Marx, whose theory is a haunted house of spectres and vampires, knew this. **Why else does he open *Capital* not quite with an 'immense', as the modern English translation has it, but with a 'monstrous' [*ungeheure*] collection of commodities?**²⁶

If we opt for Miéville's translation of *ungeheure* as 'monstrous' as opposed to 'immense', we are brought back to the very nature of commodity fetishism but now understood as that through which Capital appears to us on a daily basis. In other words, and in terms of Miéville's translation, it is not enough to say that Capital appears as an immense aggregation or accumulation of commodities since the notion of 'immense accumulation of commodities' still lacks the characteristic of fetishism proper to the whole of capitalist social totality. Thus, we can only say that a commodity truly confronts us when we understand that what we are confronted with is something that was produced by human labour and yet transcends sensuousness to then order and dictate the social relations of labor itself (i.e., real-abstraction). It is for this reason that a confrontation with commodities is a monstrous thing; something dreamed up in the minds of individuals (or artists) and produced by labor-power and yet only to ultimately threaten and dominate those who created it.

To follow Miéville, then, means to affirm the connection between surrealism and Marx in these terms: both are committed to a mode of thought that operates in the service of transforming the condition of capitalist society to which we are currently held hostage. It is to this end that the 'monstrous' collection of commodities that condition and exceed the world must be understood. As we have seen with regards to Miéville, this kind of thought is made possible by affirming surrealism as a political and aesthetic movement that was attuned to the ways in which there is more to the reality of things themselves than what is simply given in commodities, not as real-abstractions, but as simply real-concrete objects of sensation. It is for this reason that Miéville asserts the notion that fantastic works of literature and art remained oriented toward the possibility of defining or redefining what is held to be impossible (the not-real or not-yet-real). Marx and surrealism, then, converge upon and affirm the radicality of the idea that "changing the not-real allows one to think differently about the real, its potentialities and actualities."²⁷

The Racial Construction of Class & Insurgent Dilemmas

Differences aside, it is clear that the relationship between surrealism and Marxism is one that remains committed to the idea that the reality of communist struggle is the struggle for a communist reality. However, it is with respect to how Breton, Césaire, and Miéville understand this reality of struggle (i.e. the means for achieving a true revolution) where their respective differences

emerge and their limits are clarified. In the face of a disenchanted modern world characterized by social and individual alienation, Breton posed the struggle over reality in terms of an emancipated imagination, the total revolt against capitalist social relations, all of which is undertaken by a subject inspired by ways in which non-Western aesthetic practices were irreconcilable with a European sensibility. In the face of the history of colonialism, Césaire developed the concept of Negritude to signal the kind of historical subject that would be adequate to the task of the abolition of capital. And in light of the tendency within Western Marxism that would oppose the fantastical or surrealist elements of Marx's own thought against Marx's more "scientific" and "objective" moments, Miéville demonstrates the significance of mistranslating *ungeheure*, a seemingly insignificant term with respect to the scope of Marx's three volumes of *Capital*, as 'immense' as opposed to 'monstrous'.

Additionally, as in the break between Breton's and Césaire's particular iterations of a surrealist aesthetics in its relation to communist politics, it turns out to be the case that the obstacle of 'how best to revive working class politics and class struggle' is complicated not simply by the pervasive character of an alienated imagination; more profoundly, this obstacle is complicated by the fact of the colonial foundations for capital's self-valorization and self-reproduction. On this reading, surrealism's aim toward the emancipation of the imagination would imply that those individuals committed to the abolition of capital must envision a different type of collective subjectivity organized in terms that are equally historical insofar as history itself is understood, not simply as the history of class struggle, but as the history of anti-colonial struggle. In light of this requirement of an equally anti-colonial and class-based understanding of history, it is worth mentioning that the way forward has already been signaled by a former student of Césaire: Frantz Fanon. And so it should be no surprise that we encounter Césaire's name at the precise moment where Fanon qualifies violence in terms of the 'perfect mediator' between colonizer and colonized:

This line of reasoning which envisages the surgical elimination of the colonized does not morally upset the colonized subject. He has always known that his dealings with the colonist would take place in a field of combat. So the colonized subject wastes no time lamenting and almost never searches for justice in the colonial context. In fact if the colonist's argument leaves the colonized subject unmoved it is because the latter poses the issue of his liberation in virtually identical terms: "Let us form groups of two or five hundred and let each group deal with a colonist." It is this mutual frame of mind that both protagonists begin the struggle. For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis. Violence can thus be understood to be the perfect mediation. The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence. This praxis enlightens the militant because it shows him the means and the end. Césaire's poetry takes on a prophetic significance in this very prospect of violence.²⁸

However, this continuation of Césaire's project is perhaps better understood in light of Fanon's reflections on the relationship between race, class, and the struggle for national liberation. When faced with the revolutionary potential of national liberation struggles that were also struggles for the abolition of capital, and with respect to the limits at the heart of those projects of national liberation which fails to address the ways in which former colonial powers maintain their influence in the construction of a 'national bourgeoisie,' Fanon maintained the view that national liberation struggles that fail to undo the material effects of colonization result in a situation whereby formerly colonized nations understand themselves to be equal to former colonizers despite the reality being that these nation-states continue to persist upon the material inequality at the heart of their newly won presence on the international stage. In other words, with Fanon's understanding of the limits of national liberation struggles, the fate of a revolutionary subject grounded upon a unified class identity will forever be limited and fail in its aspirations since the colonial situation reveals to us that class itself is racially constructed.

Against the myths and misguided attempts (which, rather ironically, are also attributed to Fanon himself) which view the revolutionary transformation of a social totality as synonymous with achieving national self-determination, the racial construction of class society means that any failure to confront the colonial history that gave rise to this newly liberated nation-state translates into an inability in practice at carrying out a true abolition of a society founded upon class divisions. To admit the colonial foundations of capitalist development, then, means affirming a view that understands the history of colonialism as providing more, and not less, of an historical materialist analysis of capital and serves as the grounds for theorizing an adequate and new form of revolutionary subjectivity.

With respect to the origins of surrealism, its relation to the works of Marx, and the anti-colonial rearticulation it was made to undergo at the hands of Césaire, there is clearly an attempt to determine the subject who will be adequate to the task of abolishing capital. This was an attempt that began in a rather idealist manner with Breton: idealist precisely because Breton simply provided the formal characteristics revolutionary subjectivity must take (the agent of 'total revolt' who 'fires blindly into a crowd') whereas it was Césaire, and even more so Fanon, who gives this formal subject its historical, material, and therefore real, content.²⁹

Acknowledgements

[i] I would like to thank Alyssa Adamson and Marcus Brown, whose friendships, insights, and political work have shaped the ideas found here in innumerable ways. Also thank you to Mike Kryluk for showing me the relevance of Lukács in light of Miéville, and Adam Israel for his comments and feedback.

[ii] I also would like to thank Madeline Lane-McKinley, Johanna Isaacson, and Kenan Sharpe for undertaking that generally thankless task of editing and commenting on a first draft as well as their overall reception of the ideas found here. Each of them

has made this process of revision, from my end at least, one of the most seamless to date. And so it's once more into the blind field of the present.

Endnotes

Bate, David. *Photography & Surrealism: Sexuality, Colonialism and Social Dissent*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2003, p. 23. Some of the key surrealist figures photographed here are Max Morise, Roger Vitrac, Jacques-André Boiffard, André Breton, Paul Eluard, Pierre Naville, Simone Colinet-Breton, Raymond Queneau, Louis Aragon, and Marie-Louise Soupault, among others, while the image itself was used on the front cover of *La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 1, December 1924.

Baker, Simon. *Surrealism, History and Revolution*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007, pp.29-30.

Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Tr. Richard Seaver, Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969, pp. 1-48.

Breton, André. *Manifesto of Surrealism*. 1924. <https://tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.pdf>. Accessed August 3, 2016.

As Breton writes in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism: "Everything tends to make us believe there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined...cease to be perceived as contradictions...one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point". Ibid, p. 123.

Ibid, p. 6.

Ibid, p. 10.

"Poetic surrealism, to which I am dedicating this study, has applied itself to date in re-establishing dialogue in accord with absolute truth, by freeing the two speakers from the obligations of polite behaviour." Ibid, p. 35.

Ibid, p. 125.

Ibid, pp. 29-30.

A good example of this can be seen in the 1932 essay 'Murderous Humanitarianism' published by the Surrealist Group of France (that was signed by André Breton, Roger Caillois, René Char, René Crevel, Paul Eluard, J.-M. Monnerot, Benjamin Péret, Yves Tanguy, André Thirion, Pierre Unik, and Pierre Yoyotte). The piece first appeared in Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology (1934) and was translated into English by Samuel Beckett: "In a France hideously inflated from having dismembered Europe, made mincemeat of Africa, polluted Oceania and ravaged whole tracts of Asia, we surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies in the service of the revolution – of the proletariat and its struggles – and defined our attitude toward the colonial problem, and hence toward the color question." <http://racetractor.org/murderoushumanitarianism.html>. Accessed August 14, 2016.

It is worth mentioning here that along with Tanguy one would also have to consider the works of Vaché, Cahun, and Moore. Doing so helps emphasizing how these individuals are some of the best, if not most immediate, exemplars of the blend of humor and subversive criticism through art that came to define surrealism's attempt at fusing art and life, creative activity and political revolution. As noted by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley, "In the same rebellious spirit, the contemporaries they most admired were noted for their fierce repudiation of the commercialism and conformism that sustained Euro-American values: Jacques Vaché, "past master in the art of attaching little or no importance to everything"...The humorous 1929 "Surrealist Map of the World"—drawn by artist Yves Tanguy—omits almost all of Europe (except Paris) and leaves out the entire United States as well. All of this was part of what filmmaker Luis Buñuel called the surrealists "obstinate dedication to fight everything repressive in the conventional wisdom." For more see Rosemont, Franklin, Kelley, Robin D.G. Black, Brown, & Beige: *Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora: Surrealist Writings From Africa and the Diaspora*. University of Texas Press: Austin, 2009. Löwy, Michael. *Morning Star: surrealism, marxism, anarchism, situationism, utopia*. University of Texas Press: Austin, 2009, p. 22, my emphasis.

Césaire, Aimé, Depestre, René. <http://wallacethinksagain.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/aime-cesaire-on-surrealism.html>. Accessed August 10, 2016. This interview has also been published as an addendum to the republication of Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*. For more see Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Tr. Joan Pinkham. Monthly Review Press: New York, 2000, pp. 81-94.

Eshun, Kodwo. *Further Reflections on Afrofuturism*. *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, 2, Summer 2003, p. 288.

Antle, Martine, Conley, Katharine. 'Dada, Surrealism, and Colonialism,' *South Central Review*. Volume 23, Number 1, Spring 2015, 1-7, p. 1-2, my emphasis.

Ibid, p. 3.

Rosemont and Kelley, p. 305.

Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume I*. Penguin Classics: New York: 1990, p. 125.

Ibid, p. 138-39.

Ibid, p. 163-64.

Khatib, Sami. "Action puts forth its own image": Notes on Walter Benjamin's Essay on Surrealism'. https://www.academia.edu/12278185/_Action_puts_forth_its_own_image_Notes_on_Walter_Benjamin_s_Essay_on_Surrealism. Accessed October 24, 2016, my emphasis.

Federici, Silvia. Revolution at Point Zero. Brooklyn: PM Press, 2012, p. 23.

Ibid, p. 25.

Lukács, György. 'Realism in the Balance,' Aesthetics and Politics. Tr. Ronald Taylor. Verso: London, 1980, pp. 28-59.

Miéville, China. 'Marxism and Fantasy,' Historical Materialism, Vol. 10:4, 2002, pp. 45-6, my emphasis.

Ibid.

Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of The Earth. Tr. Richard Philcox .New York: Grove Press, 2004, pp. 43-4, my emphasis.

In line with the anti-colonial lineage traced throughout this essay, this contrast between the form and content of revolutionary subjectivity has been further developed by George Ciccariello-Maher in his essay 'So Much the Worse for the Whites', which is nothing short of a full scale critique of Susan Buck-Morss' Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History. Two passages from Ciccariello-Maher's essay are worth citing here: (a) "to view categories dialectically means to grasp their content rather than their formal characteristics, as when James and Fanon allows the concepts of race and nation to shift and acquire new content. If our interest is porosity...then the emergence of new identities and the infusion of others with new political content should stand front-and-center" (Ciccariello-Maher, p. 35); (b) "A decolonized dialectics is powerfully attentive to the realm of non-being, and consequently to the need for pre-dialectical struggle by the colonized and racialized to set history into motion...Such a dialectics cannot therefore reject the categories of collective action a priori, as though willing away the entire structure of colonialism and racial overdetermination. While Buck-Morss notes Césaire's excitement at Hegel's suggestion that "to arrive at the Universal, one must immerse oneself in the Particular" (16), she fails to accompany that process of immersion, and as a result cannot grasp what Césaire himself would later deem a "universal rich with all that is particular" (Ciccariello-Maher, p. 37). Just as we saw with Césaire and Fanon, Ciccariello-Maher furthers the view that locates universality in the particular content of social forms and their forms of subjectivity, rather positing universality and the relations between the forms of analysis to be one and the same. Ciccariello-Maher, George. 'So Much the Worse for the Whites'. Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy, Vol XXII, No 1, 2014, pp. 19-3

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